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Researching the U.S. Role in Foreign Politics with the Bricker Amendment

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The United States has always been conflicted about its role in international affairs. This may be in part to George Washington's Farewell Address in which he advised his fellow Americans to avoid foreign entanglements. American politicians tended to for the most part heed Washington's warning by avoiding foreign entanglements in the 19th century, but this approach to U.S. foreign policy changed in the first half of the 20th century. Throughout U.S. history, Americans have been leery of involving themselves in foreign issues such as taking part in both World War I and World War II. U.S. entry into both world wars of the 20th century was triggered by what President Wilson and Roosevelt respectively felt were provocations by foreign powers, but in both cases, the United States did not enter until after the war was raging across Europe. One ideal topic students can research to examine Americans' conflicting beliefs about the country's role in international affairs is the Bricker Amendment.

In this article, I explore how activities about the Bricker Amendment allow high school students to examine different perspectives about the U.S. role in international affairs. First, a brief overview of the C3 Framework is provided for the type of social studies instruction that high school teachers should do with teaching public issues. Then, the importance of teaching public issues in the high school classroom is discussed. Next, a brief overview of the Bricker Amendment is given. Finally, an activity is provided for students to research divergent arguments about the Bricker Amendment. The steps and resources needed to implement this activity are given.

The C3 Framework and a New Vision for the Social Studies Classroom

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) released its C3 Framework to provide a new vision for the high school social studies classroom. The C3 Framework stresses that students should analyze primary and secondary sources to answer compelling questions and

to use their findings to take civic action in the four core social studies disciplines: history, civics, economics, geography, and civics (NCSS, 2013a; Lee & Swan, 2013). By analyzing texts and taking civic action, high school social studies teachers can strengthen their students' disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills. It is important to note that historical thinking skills are different from civic thinking skills because historians ask different questions than political scientists to examine issues and events (Journell, 2017; Clabough, 2018). The C3 Framework captures these differences in disciplinary thinking, literacy, and argumentation skills through the indicators in the four core social studies disciplines. One key component of strengthening students' civic thinking skills is through teaching public issues.

Public issues are enduring issues that are not bound to one era because they are overarching topics that Americans grapple with over time (Oliver & Shaver, 1966). Some examples of these issues include the role of the U.S. government in people's lives, racial discrimination faced in the African American community, and the ways in which economic inequality issues are addressed. The examination of these public issues gets at controversial issues because people's solutions are rooted in economic, political, cultural, social, religious, and regional factors (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Therefore, it is important for the high school social studies teacher to design activities that help students grasp and articulate different solutions to an issue. These types of activities help equip students with the skills to dissect people's arguments and solutions to public issues. These skills are vital for students to complete their future responsibilities as democratic citizens (NCSS, 2013b).

Brief Overview of the Bricker Amendment

World War II brought many changes for the United States. In the wake of the destruction with this war, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two world powers. Actions

by the Roosevelt and Truman administrations through the Yalta Conference, Truman Doctrine, and Marshall Plan chartered an active role for the United States in world affairs. However, many Americans did not agree with this path.

Isolationists in Congress at the end of World War I, most notably Henry Cabot Lodge, worked to successfully defeat U.S. involvement in the League of Nations. In a similar vein, a new generation of isolationists saw the presidential election of Dwight Eisenhower and Republican control of Congress in 1952 as an opportunity to curb the role of the U.S. in international politics. This attempt to return U.S. foreign policy to more of an isolationist approach was best seen through the attempted passage of the Bricker Amendment (Caro, 2002).

John Bricker was a Republican senator from Ohio that was not a proponent of the U.S. having an active role in foreign affairs. His amendment, SJ Res 1, or what would later become more popularly known as the Bricker Amendment proposed in 1953 attempted to curb presidential activism in foreign affairs by requiring that treaties had to be ratified by the 48 state legislatures to be made into law (Newton, 2011). President Eisenhower saw the Bricker Amendment as political handcuffs that would prevent him and future Presidents from negotiating with foreign powers in the ways prescribed in the U.S. Constitution (Smith, 2012). However, the Bricker Amendment struck a chord with many Americans with mail running an estimated 9 to 1 in favor of passage with Senator Bricker's legislation. These Americans were fearful of continued U.S. action in foreign affairs (Caro, 2002). In the next sections, I discuss how the four dimensions of the Inquiry Arc can be used for high school students to examine divergent beliefs about the Bricker Amendment.

Framing the Question

“Developing questions and planning inquiries” with students (Dimension 1 of the Inquiry Arc) give focus for reading primary and secondary sources. There are multiple excerpts from primary and secondary sources that high school social studies teachers can utilize for their students to research divergent perspectives about the Bricker Amendment. One compelling question that can be employed to drive student research is the following. What is the role of the United States in international politics? This compelling question allows students to explore why people have differing views on public policies.

Exploring the Conflicting Views about the Bricker Amendment

Students need to research why there are conflicting positions on the Bricker Amendment. This allows students to “Apply Disciplinary Concepts and Tools” thus meeting Dimension 2 of the Inquiry Arc. First, students start by defining the policies contained within the Bricker Amendment. Figure 1 gives a short summary about the Bricker Amendment. Students in pairs read Figure 1 and answer the following analysis prompts.

Excerpt from Robert Caro (2002). *Master of the Senate*, p. 528.

... his amendment (Bricker Amendment), introduced as a joint resolution- “S.J. Res. 1”- at the opening of the Eighty-third Congress was the embodiment of the Old Guard’s rage at what it viewed as twenty years of presidential usurpation of Congress’s constitutional powers. And fueling the conservative’s anger now was their fear that treaties and international agreements such as the United Nations Charter and Human Rights Covenant might not only provide a legal basis for the extension of federal control over matters previously regulated by the states, but might nullify specific state laws, such as the Southern segregation laws. S.J. Res 1 struck at the heart of executive activism by calling for a constitutional amendment to restrict the President’s power in foreign affairs. ... its continuing substance was that no international compact could be binding on the United States without the passage of positive legislation not only by Congress but in many cases by the legislatures of the individual states as well.

Figure 1: Short Summary of the Bricker Amendment

1. What policy changes would occur if the Bricker Amendment was passed? Use evidence from Figure 1 to support your arguments.
2. What are the goals of the Bricker Amendment? Use evidence from Figure 1 to support your arguments.

The short summary of the Bricker Amendment in Figure 1 enables students to grasp the goals of this legislation. Students can see how isolationists like Senator Bricker were trying to undo the active role that Presidents Roosevelt and Truman framed for the U.S. in international affairs. In this way, they gain experience by dissecting the intentional goals and ripple effects of public policies (Ochoa-Becker, 1996).

With this background knowledge, students are ready to analyze the divergent views of isolationists in Congress and the Eisenhower administration about the Bricker Amendment. Figure 2 provides a short description for the reasons why isolationists in Congress and other strict constitutionalists favored the Bricker Amendment. In the same pairs as earlier, students read this short excerpt and answer the analysis prompts also in Figure 2.

Excerpt from Frank Holman (1954). *Story of the "Bricker" Amendment*, pgs. 20 and 22.

<p>The Bricker Amendment is a symbol or a line of demarcation dividing those who believe that the American concept of government and individual rights should not be sacrificed to international plans and purposes, and those who believe that such a sacrifice should be made in the interest of so-called international co-operation. ... Certainly, until it is amended the American Constitution sets up and establishes, ... an independent nation and a form of government as far removed state socialism as from communism or from any other foreign "isms." Therefore, when men in high positions who take an oath to support the Constitution and the form of government it establishes and otherwise publicly announce their support of the programs whereby through treaties and other international agreements the American concept of individual rights and form of government are undermined, they are either knowingly or unknowingly indulging in "double talk." ... The only objective, from the very beginning, of advocating a constitutional amendment on</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. According to the author, why should the Bricker Amendment be supported? Use evidence from this excerpt to support your arguments. 2. How does the author's description of why the Bricker Amendment should be supported reveal his beliefs about the role of the U.S. in international politics? Use evidence from this excerpt to support your arguments.
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<p>treaties and other international agreements was to prevent an uncontrolled “treaty power” from undermining American rights and the American form of government- to bring under some measure of control a “treaty power” that recently has been so expanded and enlarged by the new school of internationalists... (pages 20 and 22)</p>	
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Figure 2 Argument for the Bricker Amendment

As pairs share their responses, the teacher emphasizes that students use evidence from Figure 2 to support their arguments. This activity allows students to articulate the perspective of those that favored the Bricker Amendment. More specifically, students realize how supporters of the Bricker Amendment were fearful of international treaties that they felt would weaken U.S. sovereignty and rights in favor of international cooperation and agreements.

It would be a misnomer to say support for the Bricker Amendment was confined to isolationists in the Senate. Many citizens around the U.S. supported Senator Bricker’s legislation. One notable organization, the Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment, was co-founded by Ruth Murray to support this legislation. This organization was primarily made up of middle- and upper-class Republican women. Its goal was to prevent the U.S. from getting entangled in foreign affairs and treaties by spreading literature of support for the Bricker Amendment, and through its actions, the organization collected between 300,000 to 500,000 signatures in support of Senator Bricker’s legislation (Kaczorowski, 2015). Students analyze the impact of the Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment by examining the photograph in Figure 3 of Senator Bricker with Ruth Murray and answering the following analysis prompt.



Figure 3. Senator John Bricker and Mrs. Robert Murray stand behind mound of petitions supporting his constitutional amendment limiting presidential treaty-making powers (1954). Retrieved from Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

1. What is the overall message with this photograph? Use evidence from the photograph to support your arguments.

Students share their responses to the analysis prompt with this photograph. The analysis of this photograph helps students dissect how ordinary citizens supported the Bricker Amendment. Students also grasp the agency that democratic citizens have to impact and shape societal discourse on public policies (Barton, 2012). This can be seen by the large amount of mail in the

photograph supporting the Bricker Amendment. This mail was largely obtained through the petitions of support collected by the Vigilant Women for the Bricker Amendment.

The less popular side at the time was opposition to the Bricker Amendment. The Eisenhower administration was one of the notable groups leading opposition to Senator Bricker's legislation. Students in pairs can explore Eisenhower's perspective about being opposed to this constitutional amendment through reading Figure 4 and answering the analysis prompts.

Excerpt from Dwight E. Eisenhower (1963). *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956*, p. 281.

<p>As President, I had no prescribed function in the process of amending the Constitution. But as the head of government, a government that in important aspects would be seriously handicapped if this amendment were accepted, and as the head of a political party, it was my duty, in a matter of such moment to the nation's future, to participate according to my own convictions and conscience.</p> <p>The Bricker Amendment would have denigrated the status of a legitimate treaty. Every treaty of the future and possibly of the past would be subjected to ceaseless challenge by any of the states, under Article X. Lawsuits, controversy, and confusion would replace the simple and efficacious processes visualized by the Founding Fathers, and I believed, chaos in international affairs would result.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. According to President Eisenhower, why should the Bricker Amendment be opposed? Use evidence from these excerpts to support your arguments. 2. How does President Eisenhower's description of why the Bricker Amendment should be opposed reveal his beliefs about the role of the U.S. in international politics? Use evidence from these excerpts to support your arguments.
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Figure 4. Argument against the Bricker Amendment

After pairs answer these prompts, there is another class discussion. Figure 4 captures the reasons why President Eisenhower was opposed to the Bricker Amendment. For Eisenhower, the role of the U.S. had changed in world affairs because of World War II. The shrinking of the U.S. back to a pre-war isolationist stance would lead to chaos in international affairs. The teacher can ask supporting questions during this class discussion such as why would President Eisenhower's

post as the NATO Supreme Commander cause him to view the Bricker Amendment negatively? This supporting question helps students realize how Eisenhower’s professional experiences caused him to see the U.S. role in international politics as needed for world stability.

The analysis prompts from all of the Figures serve as supporting questions to help students realize why people viewed the Bricker Amendment differently. The teacher’s focus during the class discussions of Figures 1-4 should be on getting students to support their arguments with evidence, which meets the expectations of Dimension 3 of the Inquiry Arc, “evaluating sources and using evidence.”

Taking Civic Action to Support or Oppose the Bricker Amendment

Have students use all of the evidence from the class discussions and analysis prompts to individually complete one of the following writing prompts.

1. Write a petition from the perspective of a supporter or opponent of the Bricker Amendment to be distributed to members of your local community. In your petition, make persuasive arguments on why the Bricker Amendment is either a positive or negative step for U.S. foreign policy.
2. Assume the role of a supporter or opponent of the Bricker Amendment and write and deliver a speech to your local townhall on why Senator Bricker’s amendment should or should not become a law. In your speech, make persuasive arguments on why the Bricker Amendment is either a positive or negative step for U.S. foreign policy.

The length of the prompts can be adjusted based on the students’ writing abilities. Through completing one of these writing prompts, students practice taking the role of a democratic citizen by making a persuasive argument on why a certain public policy should either be supported or opposed. Perspective-writing activities like these enable students to engage in higher levels of thinking by utilizing evidence to articulate a person’s point of view (Lo, 2018). These writing prompts address Dimension 4 of the Inquiry Arc, “communicating conclusions and taking informed action” by allowing students to explore how democratic citizens impact public policies.

High school social studies teachers need to use public policies in historical eras like the Bricker Amendment to set up learning opportunities for students to practice roles that they will assume as future democratic citizens (Nokes, 2019).

Conclusion

The complementary sources and activities in this article position high school students to examine the divergent perspectives on the Bricker Amendment. While the Bricker Amendment was eventually defeated in the U.S. Senate by Senator Lyndon Johnson's political maneuvering (Caro, 2002), this public policy exposed fault lines within the American public about the U.S. role in foreign policy that would resurface throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Therefore, it is critical that high school teachers provide classroom activities that help prepare students as future democratic citizens to explore the U.S. role in foreign politics. Our social studies classrooms are one of the few spaces that our high school students have to explore and discuss differing perspectives about controversial issues that will impact their lives (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018). The examination of controversial issues like the Bricker Amendment equips our students with the analysis skills to dissect divergent opinions about public policies and allows them to reach their own conclusions and take civic action about whether the U.S. government should be involved in certain foreign political issues (Nokes, 2019).

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